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ABSTRACT

The focus of the study reported in this paper was the creative process in children's telling of stories (rather than analysis of the stories themselves). Storytelling was introduced as a possible weekly free-play school activity to children aged three to six, and most of the children chose to participate on several occasions. The storytelling of the youngest children differentiated out of imaginative play or conversation but soon became an intentional and bounded activity. Children typically drew on several sources for their stories, and they used several strategies when they had difficulty continuing the story. Smiles and laughter frequently accompanied story telling. Observations suggested that children had clear authorial intentions, that they were aware of themselves as authors, and that they valued their stories. (Author/MG)

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YOUNG CHILDREN AS AUTHORS: THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN FIRST STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The focus here is the creative process in children's telling of stories (rather than analysis of the stories themselves). Story-telling was introduced as a possible weekly free-play school activity to children aged three to six , and most of the children chose participate on several occasions. The story telling of the youngest children differentiated out of imaginative play or conversation but soon became an intentional and bounded activity. Children typically drew on several sources for their stories, and they used several strategies when they got stuck. Smiles and laughter frequently accompanied story telling, and these occasions were noted and categorized. Observations suggested that children had clear authorial intentions, that they were aware of themselves as authors, and they valued their stories. Despite obvious differences, the creative process in young children resembles the creative process in adults in significant ways.

Psychological studies of creative work in adults emphasize process, intention, sense of project, and the social environment (Arnheim, 1962; Gruber, 1981; Amabile, 1983; Perkins, 1981; Rothenberg, 1979; Doyle, 1974 and 1988). Pioneering studies of story-telling by young children have focused primarily on products, the stories themselves, analyzing their structure and content according to various theoretical schemes (Pitcher and Prelinger, 1963; Applebee, 1978; Sutton-Smith 1981). The study I am going to report complements earlier work by exploring process rather than the product and the meaning of story-telling to the child, rather than to developmental psychologists.

The young story-tellers, aged three to six, attended either nursery school or kindergarten at a college laboratory school. The children knew the investigator as a weekly visitor and story-teller.

One day the investigator said to the children, "If you tell me stories you make up, I'll write them down and make a book for you." Thereafter, "book-writing" was available as one of several free play activities during the investigator's weekly visits. In the first two weeks, children were sometimes asked if they wanted to tell a story or if they wanted to make a story out of what they just said. (The typical answer was "No".) Later on, the story-telling was entirely on the children's initiative. Over 85% of the children chose story-telling at least once, and for some, it was chosen regularly. Dictation was taken in the

classroom. Seeing a classmate dictating was a major impetus to story-telling on the part of others.

The process began when a child said, "I want to tell (or write) a story. The investigator then folded a piece of construction paper to make it look book-like (This was so that the child, like an adult author, had an object to contemplate and share, both during the process and after.) Then the investigator said, "How does the story begin?" As the child dictated, the phrases were written in the book and repeated aloud. If a child seemed stuck, the transcriber read the story so far aloud, and, when the child indicated the end, the entire story was read aloud and the title page was created.

The kindergarten children understood story-telling as a bounded, self-enclosed activity (Scarlett and Wolf, 1979) from the very beginning. This was true of some three-year-olds as well. For others, the first stories seemed extensions of either simple telling or pretend play . One first story was the statement: "Billy Boy stepped in dog-doo." Another first story consisted of "Superman is falling," as the author jumped up and fell down. Four weeks later, this child dictated a story without pantomime: "Once upon a time there were three giants. And they wanted to play, but they were afraid of the people. And the people were afraid of the monsters. So they all stayed home."

Once story-telling was differentiated as an activity, stories typically began with a standard beginning: "Once" or

"Once upon a time" or "There was once". A few also knew what came next. But many now fell silent, often turning their heads away and staring into space. Some even said, "I have to think," indicating explicit awareness that story-telling requires thought. After a while, they turned back to the transcriber and the story began.

As they dictated, children made their authorial intentions very clear. Occasionally the transcriber misunderstood a word. When she repeated the phrase back, the author corrected the error, often going to great lengths to make sure the transcriber got the word right. A five-year-old dictated a word that sounded like "board". When "board" was echoed, she said, "No, board, tweet tweet." A three year old dictated a word that sounded like "lots." On hearing the echo, he repeated his word over and over again, getting quite frustrated as the transcriber echoed "locks? lops? log?" Finally he took the transcriber by the hand, led her out the door, and pointed at the rocks. Another sign that children were quite clear on what their words were was that some occasionally repeated the lines with the transcriber when the entire story was reread.

In this study, whatever a child dictated was a story. About 15% decided to use story-telling to recount a life experience. Some indicated that intention by saying before beginning dictation, "This going to be a true story." An even smaller percentage (about 5% in the kindergarten group) used the

opportunity to recount a beloved story, video, or video game. (The investigator sometimes said, "I'd prefer a story you make up yourself," but allowed the child to go on in the face of insistence.) Most children, though, invented their stories as they went along combining material from several different sources with their own imagination: They drew on:

1. Famililar cultural sources (stories, films, videos, and video games)
2. Elements in stories invented by classmates (One story about a chicken inspired several others, for example.)
3. the routines of everyday life (eating, sleeping, playing)
4. Memorable experiences (holidays, trips, birthdays and sporting events are big in this category as are unique events like the death of a pet)
5. Events currently taking place around them (The crash of blocks stimulated the story beginning: "Once upon a time there was a blockroom...")
5. Emotional concerns and fantasy wish-fulfilling resolutions (A five-year-old began a story "My big brother is mean to me..." The next week she told a story about a shark who lived in the woods. "he thought his baby sister was very cute and he liked her." Family dramas like this often have animals as characters, by the way.)

Use of material from more than one source was typical at all ages, and among the five-year-olds, there was sometimes genuine integration. The blockroom story is an example: "Once upon a time there was a blockroom with hundreds of blocks made of candy (a Hansel and Gretel influence). And all the children who were in the blockroom builded them and licked them. Until the Martians came and destroyed them and ate them. Then one day the Martians came back and said, "I'm sorry," and threw up on all the children."

In the process of story-telling, children sometimes indicated that they were stuck either by falling silent or by saying directly, "I don't know what to say next." But they also knew some heuristics to keep the stories going. Sometimes they solved the problem by grafting the routine sequence of everyday life onto the story. Another child-invented heuristic was to look around the room for ideas. A three year old used both heuristics in her version of the three little pigs. "The three little pigs went to market. They couldn't go because the big bad wolf came...They ran to the hay house. (She paused) Then they went home and went to sleep and had breakfast. Then they go to school (She paused and looked around the room) and then they make a picture...Then they had a scissors and cut their finger." (Her eye fell on the scissors as she said this, but the cut came from imagination.)

Though there were these moments of getting stuck, very few children gave up telling their stories because of them - even three-year-olds had a sense of project - and typically, the telling was a happy experience. As they dictated, their own words sometimes made children smile and sometimes they laughed outright.

There were various occasions for smiles and laughter:

1. The creation of a happy event with words such as "Santa came."

2. Fictionally created pictures of misbehavior: (spilling orange juice, waking up the baby)

3. Disgusting events such as "kissing the nice trash" or throwing up.

4. Representations of parental discipline (spankings almost all brought smiles)

5. Unexpected juxtapositions: A five-year-old laughed as she told about a lake that walked and talked. A four-year-old laughed as she placed a classmate in the middle of an imaginative story and paused to call out, "Hey Alice, I put you in my story."

6. Solutions to self-set content problems: One child gave himself the problem of inventing the rules for his self-created video game, Evil in Pizza. He smiled as he created rules such as, if you get the pizza with the chain

in it you die, but if you don't, you get seven pizzas to eat whenever you want."

7. Playing with form: One child laughed as he dictated, "Once upon a time. The End." Time pressure made the transcriber ask another child to finish a story quickly. She laughed as she said, "and then they went to school and school was almost over. The End." Another played with form as she dictated a story about a shopping trip with her mother. She started: "Mommy went into the store. Then Mommy came out of the store. And then she came back in the store. (Now the child began.) Then she came back out of the store. And then she came back in the store..." As the child realized that her story could go on forever, she laughed and laughed. Only the investigator's imposed limit of finishing the story at the bottom of the page ended the hilarity brought by the discovery of an infinite sequence.

This last example is an exception. Children were usually very clear on when their stories ended, marking the endings with "The End" or "That's all."

There were several indications that children were pleased with their authorship. Children often smiled as their story was reread. When their book was handed to them (with the suggestion that they put it in their cubbies or in the take-home box) one typical response was to take the story to another adult instead and say, "Read my book to me." Others sometimes said to their

classmates, "I just wrote a story." At take-home time (in the class that used a take-home box), children sometimes asked for their stories. Some sometimes greeted their parents by saying, "I wrote a story today," and handed up their "book". Almost every child showed at least one of these signs of awareness of authorship and pride in it on a given day.

The stories were read to the entire class (the same day for the threes and fours; a week later for the kindergarten) and the reactions of the young authors to the public presentation of their work was observed. Most authors (over 70%) smiled at some point during the reading of their work. Here are some of the kindergarten author reactions: Some were happy throughout (slide), at times, exhuberantly so (slide). But about half had more complicated reactions, showing signs of pleasure (slide) and self-consciousness (slide)- usually in the form of hiding in some way (slide). The author is the one in the red shirt. Now the other child's story is being read.(slide) Sometimes the author hid and emerged with a sign of pleasure, then hid and emerged with signs of pleasure. In any case, it was clear that throughout the public reading of their stories, most young authors knew that it was their stories being read.

What then have we learned about the creative process in young story-tellers? They are aware of story-telling as a distinct, bounded activity they can choose. They have a sense of project, typically finishing once they begin it. Usually, they

combine several sources to create something new. They take delight at times in the forms and contents they create as they create them. And they are aware of their words and the books that transcribe them as THEIRS. This leads to some self-consciousness during public readings, and, at the same time, there is evidence of pleasure and pride in having created something they value which can be shared.

These results have implications for the development of literacy awareness, for the study of various forms of development and agency in young children, and, of course, for studying the origins and development of the creative process. Despite obvious differences, there are also remarkable similarities in the processes behind creative work in adults and the story-telling of young children.

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